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Since its creation in 1861, the Medal of Honor - our nation's highest military award - has been awarded only 3,459 times. It recognizes acts of extraordinary bravery in battle, actions that occur, as the citation itself states, "at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."

Aside from two citations awarded posthumously for heroism during the United States' 1993 mission in Somalia, the last actions that earned Medals of Honor occurred during the Vietnam War. None were bestowed for the Persian Gulf War, nor were any earned during the nation's subsequent military conflicts around the globe.

But as the war against terrorism continues in the Middle East, military experts, politicians and historians believe new instances of medal-caliber battlefield gallantry could come to light.

"Any time you have people in harm's way, you're going to have people going above and beyond the call of duty," said Gurnee resident Allen Lynch, a Vietnam War veteran who is one of only two living Medal of Honor recipients from the Chicago area. "And clearly, in Afghanistan or Iraq or wherever, you're going to have people doing that - and that will result in Medals of Honor."

The Medal of Honor was established for the U.S. Navy during the Civil War and later was expanded to all services. Although it's different for each branch of the military, it essentially consists of a five-pointed star that hangs from a blue ribbon and is worn around the neck.

To earn the medal, a soldier must perform a deed of conspicuous bravery or self-sacrifice while engaged in armed conflict with an enemy of the United States or another opposing force. Most have been wounded in the process; many have been killed.

"For all of us who are veterans, a chill goes down your spine when you see the blue ribbon," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park, who also serves as a Naval Reserve intelligence officer. "It is the ultimate symbol of heroism far beyond the call of duty."

People who have earned the medal call themselves recipients, not winners. The medal isn't a prize awarded at the end of a contest or sporting event, they say.

Many insist they don't deserve the decoration.

"I'm holding this for people," said Gurnee's Lynch, 58, who pulled three wounded comrades to safety and defended their position single-handedly after his unit was ambushed near a Vietnamese village in 1967. "I'm wearing it for everybody who should have gotten it but didn't."

Lynch is one of 132 living Medal of Honor recipients. He and Waukegan resident Richard Bush, a World War II veteran who declined to be interviewed, are the only two in the Chicago area.

Lynch, the veterans policy adviser to Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, said he and most other recipients feel a great responsibility to live their lives in ways that honor the medal and their former comrades.

"The easiest part is winning it in battle," he said. "The hard part is living up to what it means."

Tradition calls for the president to approve Medals of Honor and present them to recipients or their survivors. Harry S. Truman, himself a World War I veteran, reportedly said he'd rather have the blue band of the Medal of Honor around his neck than be president.

President Bush has awarded four Medals of Honor. The most recent ceremony, in July 2002, posthumously honored U.S. Army Capt. Humbert R. "Rocky" Versace, a prisoner of war in Vietnam who valiantly resisted his captors until they executed him in 1965.

"The president has said that when you meet a veteran who wears that medal, you are meeting one of the bravest to ever wear our country's uniform," White House spokesman Jim Morrell said. "It is a testament to the bravery and character of those individuals."

The most recent actions that earned Medals of Honor occurred in Somalia in 1993. Army Master Sgt. Gary I. Gordon and Army Sgt. Randall D. Shughart were posthumously honored for their efforts to rescue crewmembers from two downed helicopters.

The ordeal later was depicted in the film "Black Hawk Down."

No one received the medal for service during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The brief conflict likely did not last long enough for actions of the type that earn Medals of Honor to have occurred, Kirk said.

Additionally, the odds were overwhelmingly with U.S. forces throughout the war, reducing the possibility for the type of desperate situations that lead to medal-worthy heroics, Kirk said.

That isn't the case with the nation's ongoing campaigns against terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the conflicts become more protracted, combat situations may arise that result in Medal of Honor nominations.

"I would expect ... we will see Medal of Honor recipients coming out of those countries," said Kirk, whose own military experience includes combat flights in Iraq and Kosovo. "This conflict in Iraq, for example, is lasting long enough that we will see the very high awards coming for what (soldiers) did. And there may be times when we will see extraordinary acts of heroism."

Larry Smith, author of the best-selling book "Beyond Glory: Medal of Honor Heroes in Their Own Words," agrees.

"It can happen at any time," said Smith, who profiled 24 recipients for his book, which is being released in paperback this week. "It can happen on a street corner in Fallujah, given the right circumstances."

The actions don't just need to occur to earn a medal - they must be witnessed, too. A key component of the Medal of Honor investigation process is the effort to verify a nominated incident with eyewitnesses.

"Medal of Honor actions occur all the time in combat - they just don't get noticed," Smith said.

Lynch said he already has heard of a few incidents in the Middle East that could eventually garner Medals of Honor.

"I would be surprised if that didn't happen," Lynch said. "Whenever the military is engaged in combat operations, Medal of Honor (actions) can happen."

The White House also is aware of extraordinarily courageous actions that have been performed in the war on terrorism, including ones that already have earned some of the military's highest decorations, Morrell said. Certainly, the Medal of Honor could be among the citations to be awarded during this arduous conflict, he said.

"Throughout our history, there have always been members of our armed forces who have been willing to lay down their lives in defense of our freedoms," Morrell said. "It's important that we remember their sacrifice. And the Medal of Honor is certainly one of the most important ways to honor those individuals."

Medal: Somalia is last time war led to awarding of honor.